



RECYCLING THEN

Although metal can be bent and beaten into many shapes, its most important characteristic is that it can be completely melted down and recast into another form or remade ‘as good as new’.

1550 1600 1650 1700 1750 1800 1850 1900 1950 2000

RECYCLE

We tend to think of recycling as a modern thing—the n-gram graph above shows that use of the word ‘recycle’ has only been widely used for about 60 years—but this ability to be *remade* in the fire, was hugely important in the past. Once people started to melt and remelt their metals it became a totally new kind of material. Only metal could be recycled in this way. It must have seemed quite magical.

As a result of all this, metal must have been incredibly valuable in prehistory. But for a long time archaeologists believed that recycling was relatively rare in the past.

In some places, this seems to be true. In Shang China, tonnes of bronze were made and put into burials with no intention of recovery (although many tombs were looted in later periods).

But, researchers at Oxford are now trying to trace more subtle evidence of ancient recycling by studying patterns in huge collections of old chemical data.

